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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of community in education. It focuses on the relation between vulnerability and resilience and how this dialectic is fundamental to the workings of community. Community without vulnerability is impoverished since it offers no chance to build resilience. However, vulnerabilities may be perceived as flaws that could be attended to as dangers, imperiling the well-being of community. To explore these ideas, communities at a public urban college, a private Catholic elementary school, an all-girls private Catholic high school, and a restructured public middle school were studied. In each site, community emerged as an important construct for the participants, though its meanings and practices differed. Each group was able to create four conditions (group identity, accounting for internal diversity, ways to learn how to become competent, and celebrations) that are recognized as community. Each site constructed its group identity in a different way, and the success of learning the norms of community varied. Three of the groups built resilient communities, whereas a fourth group could not find a satisfactory resolution in dealing with internal differences. A community's robustness or fragility may be measured by its ability to tolerate fractures while maintaining collective strengths. (Contains 31 references, 6 tables and 5 figures.) (RJM)

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Supporting community in schools: the relationship of resilience and vulnerability  
paper presented at AESA, October 31, 1999

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A longing for and celebration of community is pervasive in our schools. Community, however, gets built only as community is practiced, and there is no guarantee of successful construction of resilient community even among the most dedicated group.

The notion of community is important in schools, as evidenced by the growing body of literature that extols its virtues, but it is as yet a taken-for granted notion (Calderwood, 1997, 1998; Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993; Lieberman, 1992 & 1994; Westheimer, 1998). Although the idea of community is understood and played out differently within different groups, there exists a common set of conditions that must be met if the social relations of community are to produce resilient and enduring community. I frame these fundamental conditions in terms of personal and group identity that are centered in the creation and maintenance of meaningful differences and commonalities.

The root of the term “community” is derived from the Latin word *communis*, and in its earliest and most enduring sense, links *under obligation* with *together* (Williams, 1976). The social transactions that mark the process of community are conducted among differentiated individuals within the social group. Logically, then, some accounting must be made of these individuals in order that those within community can know how to transact effectively with each other. They must “communicate”, that is, talk together and construct shared meanings. In addition, according to Glare (1990), the root word “munio” means to provide with defensive fortifications, or to build a fortified town. Thus those in community (com-munis) together construct the walls or boundaries that ward off outsiders. The work of community then, from the earliest use of the term, has always incorporated the mutual processes of inclusion and exclusion, marked by the construction and defense of borders or boundaries and internal transactions of talk and other social relations among differentiated individuals (Erickson, personal communication. 1996). The organization of community is based on symbolic behavior in the form of beliefs, values and activities that reflect the social relations we call community (Cohen, 1985; Hillary, 1985, 1986).

The word “community” has two important meanings in current popular usage: it labels specific groups of people, and describes specific social relations among people within a social group. A group may consider itself to be a community, or may be labeled as such by outsiders. Certain types of social relations may be pointed out (again, by insider or outsider) as indicative of the presence of community within the group.

The presence or absence of the conditions necessary for community to flourish is not necessarily an important focus of a group intent on other issues. However, for any group that wishes to maintain itself in community, it is important that their practices are such that the conditions arise and persevere. If the conditions are sufficiently present, then it will be possible to carry out the work of differentiation, and to attend to its concomitant vulnerabilities and build resilient community.

Common sense, wistfulness and communitarians tell us that the most basic task of community is to strengthen commonalities within its membership. The allure of commonality, however, obscures a more fundamental and essential task of community. The most basic task of community is not to make common, but to differentiate; that is, to account for the differentiation of insiders from outsiders and of insiders from each other. For community to become resilient and to flourish, the members need to attend to the vulnerabilities that accompany the accommodation of these differences.

Because community is such a fragile state, the ways that group members heed its vulnerabilities are of paramount concern in building resilient community. Resilience is developed and strengthened because vulnerabilities and fragilities offer the opportunity to develop the habits and practices that protect the social relations of community. This is counter-intuitive to the notion that community within a group is strong because commonalities indicate strength and resilience.

The relation between vulnerability and resilience is fundamental to the workings of community. In other words, resilience is predicated upon the existence of vulnerability. Community without vulnerability is impoverished as to the opportunity to carry out the responsive practices that build resilience. Community untested by vulnerability is neither here nor there, neither weak nor strong. But strength and fragility as elements of the practices of community, as

qualities of community, do not exist outside the practices that call up the social relations. They are ephemeral; real and relevant only as the social relations of community play out. Strength in one context may be fragility in another. Resilience is a possible response to vulnerability, fragility is another possible response to vulnerability, and fragility can sometimes be developed into the strength of resilience. Certain responses to vulnerabilities in community, then, offer practice in resilience. Other responses do not, and may lead to the development of community-threatening fragility. What happens with vulnerability is more reliably indicative of the strength, resilience or fragility of community than how smoothly the social relations and practices proceed.

If vulnerabilities are perceived as design flaws, or as cracks undermining the strength of a foundation, they may be attended to as dangers imperiling the well-being of community. Groups and their members might act precipitously to eradicate the perceived dangers without a full understanding of the opportunities they present to build resilience. Perhaps vulnerabilities might be perceived as trivial or inconsequential, and consequently ignored or tolerated. Even vulnerabilities felt as extremely threatening may be ignored or tolerated, in denial, or because of an inability to otherwise attend to them. Even when vulnerabilities are noticed, examined and are attended to with the intention of building resilience, resilience is not always achieved. Sometimes the vulnerabilities prove fatal to the health of community despite all efforts.

#### The research project

The research sites are located within a public urban college, a private Catholic elementary school, an all-girls private Catholic high school, and a restructured public middle school. The Catholic schools, St Margaret's Academy Elementary and High Schools, were two of the sites visited during a two-year research project funded by The Facilitator Center of the State of New York. Although I spent time in all grades of the elementary school, my primary focus in the high school was on the first months of ninth grade only. The public middle school, Uptown School, was the site of a three year collaborative school-university research project. The fourth instance was a single-semester research project, in which I was an invited participant-observer in an experimental remedial writing course offered to 15 deaf and hearing undergraduates at Urban U.

The research agendas and method differed in each project, although all employed qualitative methodology, including long-term, intensive participant observation, interviews, document analysis, written notes, audio and video-taping. As the two multi-year projects roughly overlapped, constant comparative analysis was conducted as data was gathered and analyzed.

In each site, community emerged as an important construct for the participants, although its meanings and practices differed. Vulnerability, fragility and resilience differed as well. In order to better understand the notion of community within and across the sites, I documented answers to the following open-ended questions: What do people say and believe? What do they do? How do their words, beliefs and practices together engender or fail to engender the social relationships and feelings about these that are recognized as community by those within the group? What emerges as consistently important, and what seems to be of only local importance, with regard to notions of community?

### Findings

Each group studied was able to create, even if only briefly, four conditions (group identity, accounting for internal diversity, ways to learn how to become competent, and celebrations) that accompany the rise of practices and feelings about these practices that are recognized as community. Three of the groups were successful in building resilient community. It is significant that these three groups were less concerned with the notion of community than with the education of their students. Thus, the group that successfully builds community may consider the social relations of community as incidental, although important to its other practices. In fact, the one group studied here, the remedial writing class, in which the notion of community was more prominent than the notion of practice, failed to build resilient community. Their sense of community identity was never securely established, and they did not learn how to master what ought to have been the central practice of their community.

There is a relationship between the nature of community at each site and the work to which it was put. This relationship drew on the strong normative powers of community in both the Catholic schools. The relations tentatively drew on the identity-transformative powers of the process of communal support to maintain a struggle against a hostile institution in the remedial

writing class. At Uptown school, community was envisioned as the path through the opening doorway of school transformation.

As the words, practices and beliefs of the participants at the four school sites demonstrate, the construction of group identity was accomplished differently at each location. Only in Uptown School did the internal differences and diversity of its members have the capacity to powerfully influence any aspect of group identity. For all three other groups, internal diversity and difference were made significant or insignificant in order to align with and support prior group identity. The difference in the primacy of group identity held implications for the ways in which community could demonstrate its resilience in the schools. Uptown's practices of resilience demonstrated adaptation rather than intractability, but in the two private schools, resilience was demonstrable in the inviolability of their group identities. The members of the writing class, in contrast, had neither an acceptable, well-established group identity, nor satisfactory resolution of how to deal with their internal differences.

Learning how to be in community was among the most important work done. The success of learning the norms of community, however, varied from site to site. The two Catholic schools were most successful in indoctrinating their newcomers and training their members to internalize community norms. The longevity of their existence contributed to this success. Well-established norms are powerful, and mature community members have had much experience in affirming and sustaining them. In a newer school like Uptown, there had only been a handful of years to develop and affirm norms. Also, due to the evolving coherence of community at Uptown, norms were difficult to establish with clarity or with any guarantee of permanence. Norms of community practice were not strong for the remedial writing class.

Some vulnerability was made visible by the presence of subgroups. At all sites, if subgroups engaged in talk or practices that brought attention to issues that could factionalize the larger group, compensatory practices were arranged. From an outside perspective, such compensatory actions contained unfortunate consequences for some of the participants. From the inside perspective, however, these practices were in the interest of the community as a whole, and thus desirable and valued.

The gap between how group members idealized their community and the actual practices in which they engaged was a significant site of vulnerability for community at all places.

### Transforming vulnerability into resilience

Resilient community thrived at St. Margaret's Academy Elementary School, due in part to its long history as a successful educational institution. The inculcation of goodness and appropriateness supported the ways in which diversity was made tolerable, as did the organization of the teaching and learning of academic matters. The resulting harmony and trusting relations supported both a strong sense of being in community and practices that affirmed their long standing resilient community. Vulnerabilities were managed through reduction or by ignoring them. The group members, although highly valuing their notions of community and their sense of being in community, paid much less attention to the idea of community, and much greater attention to their central practices of teaching and learning academic subjects, and inculcating goodness and appropriateness.

The students and staff at St. Margaret's Academy High School were able to support resilient community as they, too, had entered into long-standing resilient community. They successfully used rigorous application of normative practices to maintain this tradition intact. As at St. Margaret's Academy Elementary School, the students and faculty of the High School poured most of their efforts into academic pursuits, and into the management of appropriate behavior and attitude. They took the notion of community for granted, considering it implicit in their family tradition.

The staff and students of Uptown School were able to build resilient community, despite the many vulnerabilities opened by their practices. They could not refer to community longevity, but instead looked to their everyday practices to affirm community and a sense of community. Although the staff and students at Uptown School devoted much time to academic pursuits, they also spent much time attending to the socialization of the students. Unlike at the Catholic schools, however, the focus at Uptown was not to normalize the students into specific patterns of behavior, but rather to respond sensitively and wisely to the needs of the students. Uncomfortable mismatches between values and practices were conscientiously explored by staff and students in a whole-hearted pursuit of idealized community.



Why did the building of resilient community fail in the remedial writing class? Resistance to forming community persisted because of existing in-group antipathies that were well founded in important sociopolitical patterns, a lack of understanding of the importance of the group's marginalization to Urban U's identity, and a deep reluctance to accept new identities cemented in stigma were only some of the reasons. Additionally, the seduction of the notion of communal caring blotted out other reasonable pedagogical decisions, such as practicing writing.

#### Implications for the role of community in education

The robustness or fragility of community may be measured by its ability to tolerate fractures while maintaining collective strengths, but additionally its resilience might also depend upon the concurrence of two apparent contradictions: reduction of the possibilities of avoidable fractures and the sufficient occurrence of necessary vulnerable moments.

Commonality in community may be desired, even necessary, but maintaining important differences may be equally necessary. Transforming difference into commonality may promise connection and commitment, but the hidden or unexpected price of this transformation may undermine the gains thus made. The accommodation of difference and its balance with sufficient commonality requires much time and energy consuming attention. This indicates that the central practice of the group, for example, writing, cannot be the only practice of the group.

The conditions for community cannot be successfully met serially or sporadically if community is to thrive within a group. They must be continually called into existence through the interactions of the group, and through its interaction with those outside the group. Given the evidence from the four groups, resilient community may best be supported through practices which are only secondarily designed to call up community, such as learning how to become a competent ninth-grader, teaching explicitly, making wise decisions, and so on. Additionally, the conditions may most effectively support the development of resilient community if they are cohesive, if they hold together with integral logic. Much of the vulnerability within community is visible within the accommodations that must be made so that cohesiveness can result.

Critical examination of every day practices may well support community in groups that place a premium on internal democracy, or who seek to transform schooling in general. But

inquiring about the social relations and practices that indicate community can be as risky a business as ignoring fragilities. Critical examination of everyday practices may or may not undermine community in schools that have established traditional identity and practices that are deemed successful by the group. The uncertainty of what might replace cherished notions and firmly planted practices is not unreasonably feared by groups who believe that their actions are in satisfactory accord with their beliefs. Since this attitude allow such groups to carry out their primary practices effectively, there is little incentive to open the Pandora's box of critical inquiry. The decision to miss out on the positive possibilities of transformation is also a decision to avoid the negative possibilities of transformation.

Community that seeks to transform schooling may not be possible or even desired in every educative group. Such community is threaded with almost as much fragility as resilience. Normalizing, tradition-honoring community minimizes the occurrence of fragility more emphatically. However, adaptive resilient community may be more effective in transforming fragility into resilience. Whether adaptive or immutable community is possible, of course, greatly depends on institutional factors that may or may not be easily challenged. Despite these challenges, people will continue to seek to establish community in schools. Groups that are well satisfied that community is strongly established in their schools may choose not to examine it too closely. However, if they do choose to examine the nature of community, they might adapt the following set of questions:

- Why do we desire to be in community?
- What functions might community serve for the group?
- What effects would the presence of communal relations have on the central practices of the group?
- What effects will the central practices of the group have on community?
- How will we account for identity and diversity?
- How will we learn and teach each other to be in community?
- How will we celebrate ourselves in community?
- How will we respond to our vulnerabilities? How much fragility can we bear?

- How will we transform our vulnerabilities and fragilities into resilience?
- How will we know when we are in or out of community?

Tables and Figures

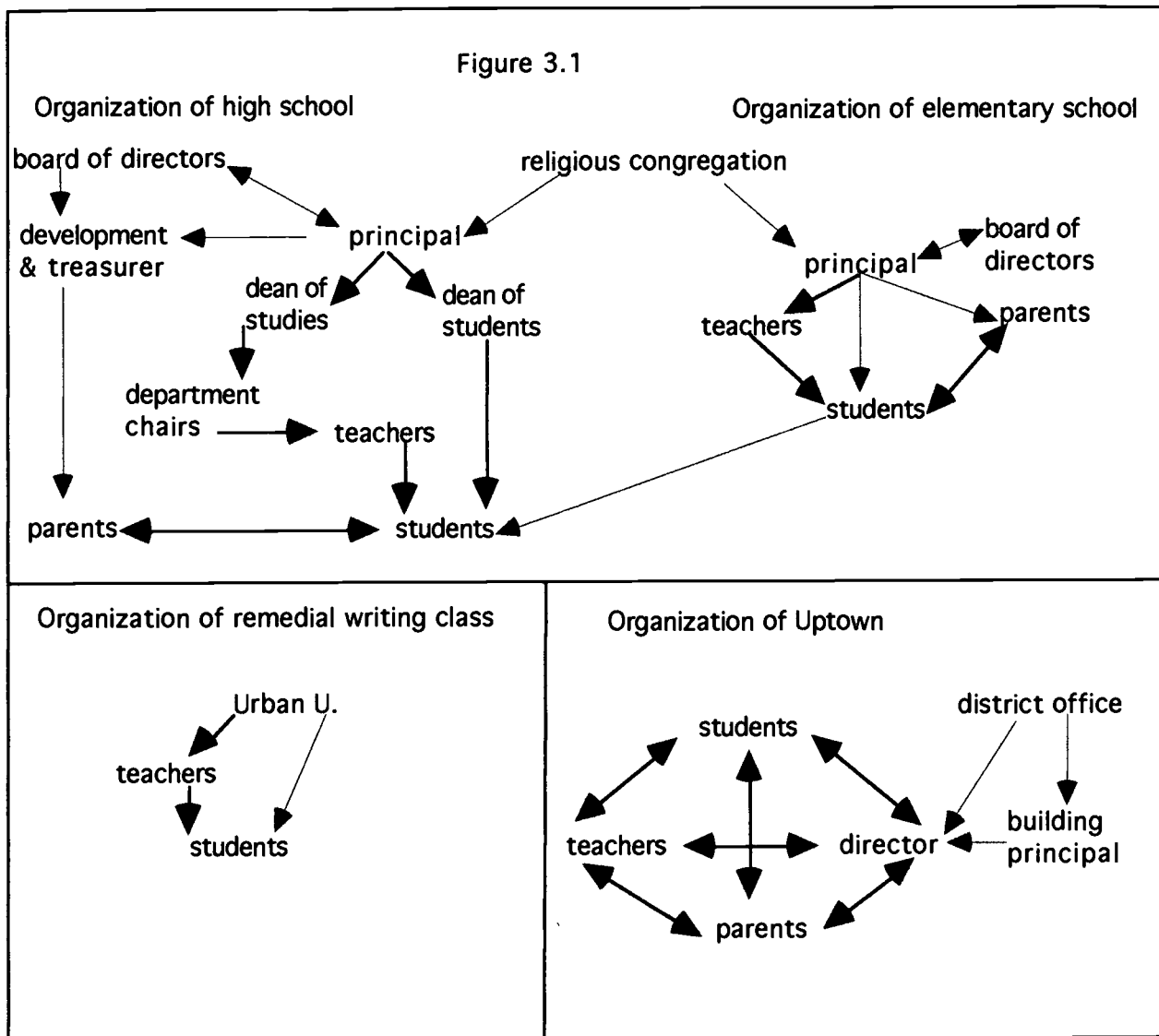


Table 5.1  
Elements of group identity

	St. Margaret's Academy Elementary School	St. Margaret's Academy High School	Uptown School	Remedial Writing Class
Boundary	public schools with regard to values and the organization of teaching and learning, internally perceived as open to all within spiritual family	academic rigor in comparison with other high schools	all other schools	the university, successful writers
Border	not perceived as important by insiders, perceived as economic and gender-limited by outsiders	myth of familial commonality imposed from inside, limited by economics, gender and religious affiliation.	professional identity	The WAT
Group identity	Spiritual family, real family	intergenerational family	professional community, caring family	struggling writers who honor their differences and stigmatized failed writers; marginalized, incompetent writers
type	functional community: spiritual	functional community: faith	values community & community of practice:	community of practice: writers
	lifetime spiritual membership transcends school setting	intergenerational membership transcends school setting	professional limited tenure of membership only relevant within school setting	15 week tenure of membership only relevant within the class.
values and beliefs	common core of values and beliefs affirmed by all members  values and beliefs are cohesive	common core of values and beliefs affirmed by all members  values and beliefs are cohesive	open/multiple sets of beliefs and values assembled by members values and beliefs may be cohesive, compete and/or conflict	unstable core of values and beliefs assembled by members values and beliefs compete

Table 5.2 Management of internal difference and diversity

St. Margaret's Academy Elementary school	St. Margaret's Academy High School	Uptown School	Remedial Writing Class
spiritual commonality	commonality and tradition	attention to individual students	common stigma
myth of family	myth of family	staff as decision-makers	stigma into honor
diversity tolerated if insignificant	diversity treated as non-existent	differences and diversity stressed	diversity and differences explored
conformity and uniformity	difference not tolerated	individuality	neutralized difference
appropriate behavior demanded	proper attitude demanded by staff and students	curricular innovations	critical analysis of common struggles
zone of silence maintained		power of sub-groups is restricted	
		consensus and democracy	

Table 5.3 Management of dissent and consensus

St. Margaret's Academy Elementary school	St. Margaret's Academy High School	Uptown School	Remedial Writing Class
divergent opinions are kept silent	divergent opinions are kept silent	divergent opinions become consensus	divergent opinions are discussed
		reflective conversations dominate	critical conversations dominate
"zone of silence" operates	appropriate "attitude" is enforced		teacher controls voice
authoritative decisions	authoritative decisions	democracy and consensus	mediated by teacher
acceptance of authority	acceptance of authority	negotiated authority	acceptance of teacher authority

Table 5.4  
Elements of Learning How To Be In Community And Celebrating Community

	St. Margaret's Academy Elementary school	St. Margaret's Academy High School	Uptown School	Remedial Writing Class
identity	clearly defined, competence grows	clearly defined little flexibility is tolerated	professional identity well developed	conflicted, marginal status in university
idealized versions of identity	essential to maintain not subject to critique	essential to maintain not subject to critique	in development, subject to critique and revision	conflicted
myths	prevalent, not subject to deconstruction	prevalent, not subject to deconstruction	critiqued and debunked if not substantiated	not seen as reality but as wish fulfillment
diversity and difference	only insignificant difference is tolerable	conformity is necessary to continue traditions	diversity and difference very important	antipathy among sub-groups, ignorance of others' needs
dissent	irrelevant	hierarchical decisions	taken seriously	not tolerated
consensus	irrelevant	assumed to be implicit	highly valued	irrelevant
special interests	ignored	vigorously eradicated	valued, but controlled	dismissed as irrelevant
conflicting ideals	irrelevant	irrelevant	respected	irrelevant
norms	clear, strictly enforced	clear, strictly enforced	not consolidated, in flux	not established
resistance to normative practices	weak	weak	sincere and open	insignificant
democracy	insignificant	insignificant	significant	irrelevant
conformity	valued, significant	significant	not valued, avoided	insignificant
academic pursuits	explicit instruction, no individualized curricula	tracked classes explicit instruction	individualized, learning is facilitated	writing not practiced enough
celebration	regular and frequent, scheduled	regularly scheduled	regular and frequent, scheduled and impromptu	neither regular nor frequent, spontaneous

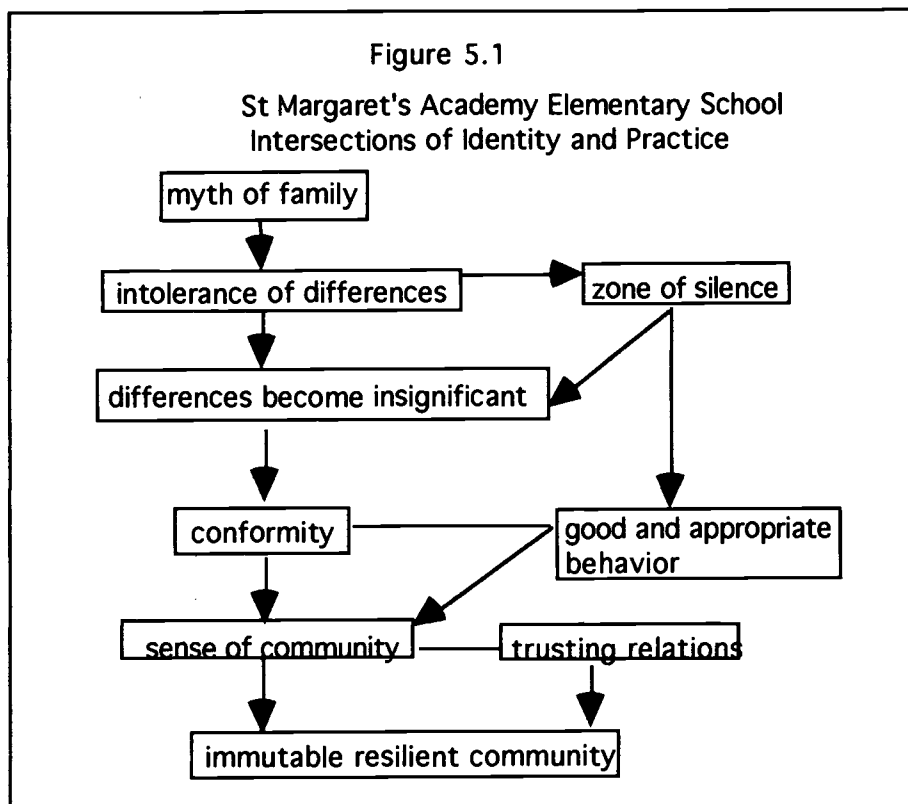
Strengths of Community at Each Site

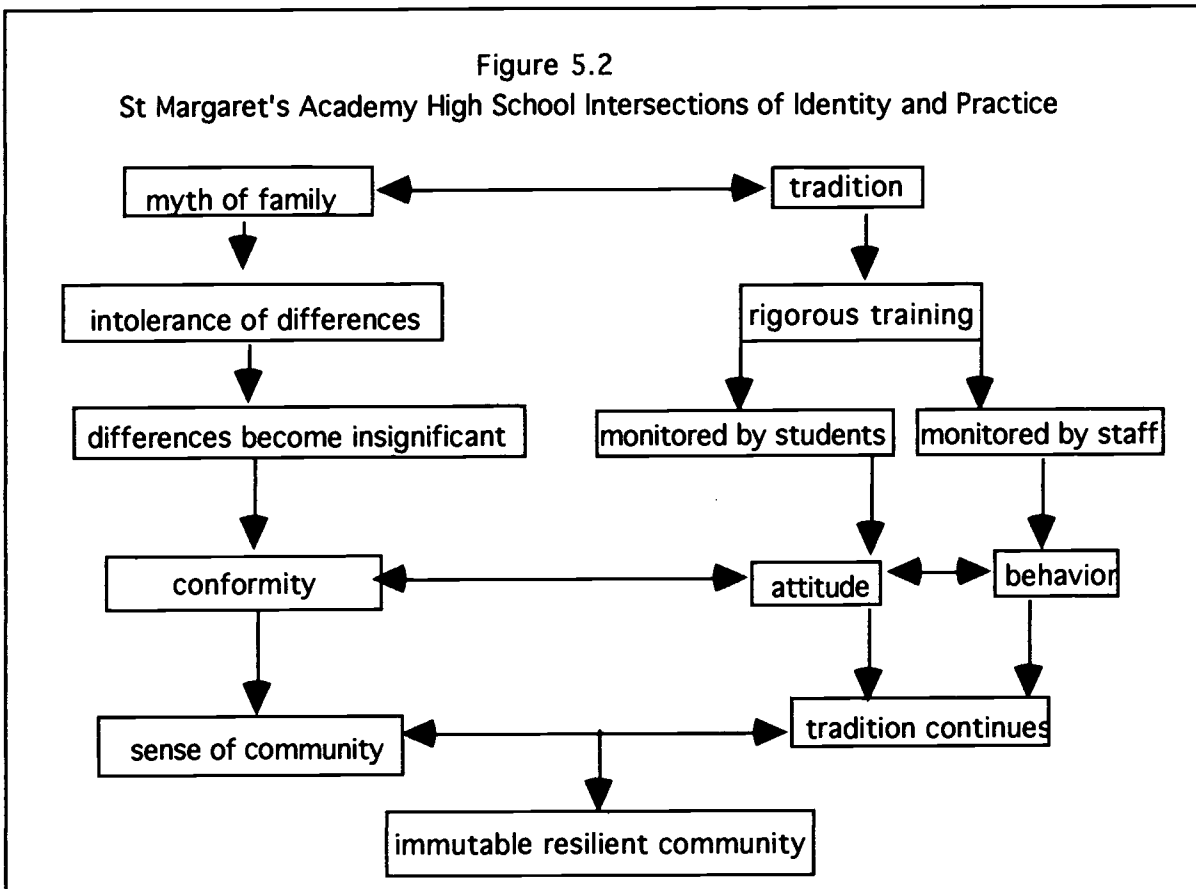
St. Margaret's Elementary School	St. Margaret's Academy High School	Uptown School	Remedial Writing Class
Spiritual community is inclusive and enduring.	The intergenerational family is enduring.	The staff is a professional community.	Transformation of stigma into honor could have promoted valued identities.
Trusting relations are sustained.	Clear guidelines for appropriate behavior are accepted.	Trusting relations are sustained.	Critical analysis of situated lives could have been a transformative act.
Clear guidelines for academic and social behaviors create a sense of orderliness	Clear expectations support students' academic achievement and staff professional identity.	Students' social needs are addressed and often met.	
The myth of family is sustained	The myth of family is sustained	Consideration of and attempted eradication of internal inequities.	
The notion of tolerance remains salient	Tradition continues	The group adapts to challenges	
identity is not conflicted	identity is not conflicted	Identity and practice change in response to new needs	
professional practice effective	professional practice effective	professional practice effective	

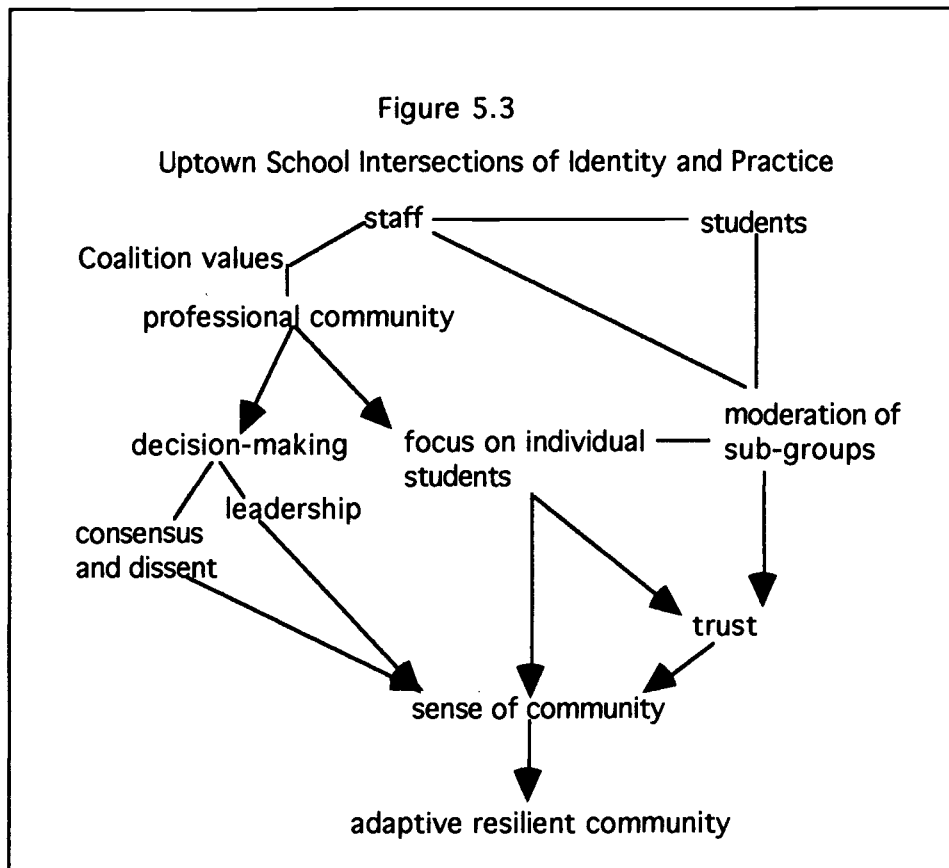


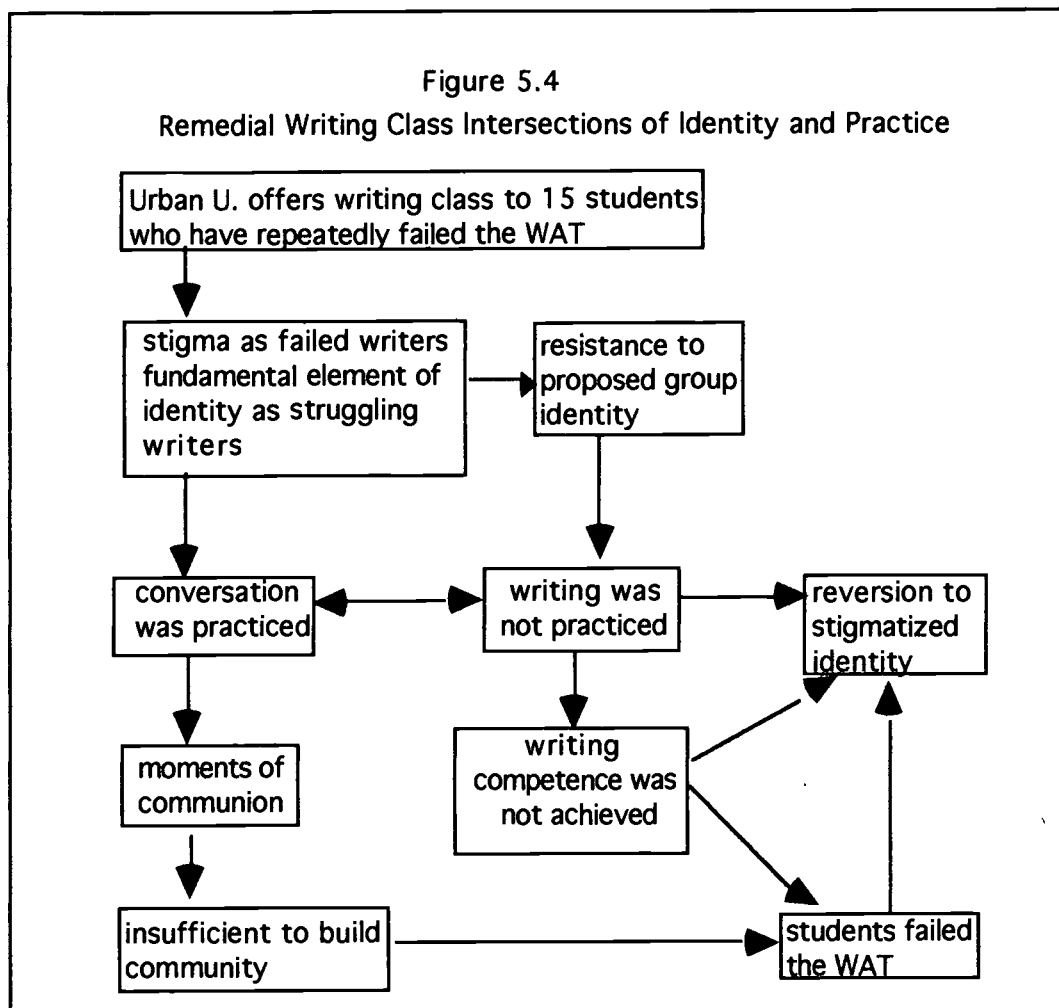
Fragility of Community at Each Site

St. Margaret's Academy Elementary	St. Margaret's Academy High School	Uptown School	Remedial Writing Class
The myth of family cannot eliminate pervasive differences.	The myth of family requires sacrifice of personal identity.	Forced consensus can result in sabotage, resentment, abdication of decision-making responsibilities.	Transformation of stigma did not eliminate gatekeeper power.
Significant differences are ignored, existing tensions are not addressed.	Any deviation from appropriate "attitude" causes discord.	Pockets of inclusion and communion can factionalize the group.	Transformation of stigma did not increase writing skill.
		Attending to individual student needs sometimes creates secrecy and erosion of trust.	Important differences continued to factionalize the students
			Realistic assessment of situated lives resulted in resignation for some students.
			Professional practice was not effective









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